DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 935 IR 056 050

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TITLE Violence in Children's Literature Today.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 6p.; In: Dreams and Dynamics. Selected Papers from the Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship (22nd, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia, September 27-30, 1993); see IR 056 045.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescent Literature; Attitude Change; Books; *Childrens Literature; Child Responsibility; Consciousness Raising; Foreign Countries; Punishment; *Reading Material Selection; Role; *Violence; War
IDENTIFIERS Cause Effect Relationship; Controversy

ABSTRACT

Because violence is an inescapable reality of the world, this paper asks the question, "Does violence have any place in children's literature?" For centuries, children's literature has encompassed stories in which the virtuous were rewarded and evildoers suffered retribution. Historically, violence was frequently part of punishment. Children of the past were directly confronted with their responsibility for their choices and actions and the likelihood of severe punishments following closely upon wrongdoing. Violence in juvenile literature has also been praiseworthy and even glamorous, expressed as people "doing their duty," for example, in a wartime situation. Stories that did not concern war often incited children to demonstrate physical courage. Females as well as males were forced to face danger or be ready to sacrifice themselves. It is only in recent decades that the place of violence in children's books has been so vigorously questioned. Some current viewpoints take the position that children's books may encompass violence and conflict, but it is essential that they do so in ways that show the suffering caused, and offer solutions other than retaliatory violence. Once one has accepted that there is a place for violence in children's literature, it is still difficult to judge which books are acceptable. It is important to find books that pose the issues for children in terms meaningful to them in their world. (Contains 17 references.) (SWC)

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Violence in Children's Literature Today

by
Maureen Nimon

As adults we are aware hat violence is an inescapable reality of our world. However, that should not prevent us from posing the question, "Does violence have any place in children's literature?" Fiction is an artifice. We use story to extend our experience and to find meaning in it. It may serve this purpose for children with our mirroring exactly life in all its aspects. As arbiters of the content and distribution of children's books, we are responsible if violence appears in them. Its inclusion should therefore be a considered decision and its nature and the manner of its treatment ones we have judged to be appropriate. Similarly, its exclusion must also be justified.

In examining our initial question of whether violence should appear in children's literature today, a perspective may be given to our deliberations by reviewing swiftly the history of books for children. It is worth remembering that in the didactic tradition of writing for children, punishment figured strongly, whether authors were Puritans eighteenth century rationalists or nineteenth century Evangelicals. Writing for children has for centuries encompassed pointed little stories in which the virtuous were rewarded and evildoers suffered retribution. Violence, particularly physical violence, was frequently part of punishment, as in the case of a porter who sought to cheat a fisherman and was given fifty lashes and dismissed.[1] This story appeared in one of Nelson's *Royal Readers*, widely used in the United Kingdom and the Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But violence also threaded through the lives of the good, many of whom had to prove their steadfastness by enduring physical affliction or mental intimidation. Take the case of the little drummer boy who was popular with the officers and men in his regiment until one day he was offered a glass of rum. "I am a temperance boy, and do not taste strong drink," he replied. The officers and men tried to change his mind until at last the major ordered him to drink it, warning him it was death to disobey. Even in the face of a threat such as this, the boy stood his ground. Again this story appeared in a reading series prepared for schools so there was clearly community acceptance of the promulgation of stories which incorporated violent threats against children.[2] Sometimes violence was used to admonish. We all know of the incident in Mrs. Sherwood's *History of the Fairchild Family* (1818) in which quarrelsome children were taken to view the remains on a gibbet of a man who had first argued with, then killed his brother. Even trivial and thoughtless actions could lead to disaster. A child carelessly dropped an orange peel on the pavement. This caused a boy to slip, breaking his leg and suffering much pain. The story uncompromisingly laid the responsibility for the accident upon the first child.[3]

Thus in school reading books and magazines produced for their leisure, children of the past were directly confronted with their responsibility for their choices and actions and the likelihood of severe punishments following closely upon wrong-doing. The lessons were nothing if not direct. Similar messages were repeated more starkly, if possible, in the traditional literature where no adults sought to ameliorate the punishments visited upon the figures of evil in fairy stories. In *Snow White* the witch queen stepmother was forced to wear red hot slippers and "dance" to her death for her sins.[4]

Apart from its admonishing, instructive and punishing qualities, violence in juvenile literature has had other roles. It could be praiseworthy, even glamorous. In the late nineteenth century throughout the British Empire, both the leisure reading of children and their compulsory reading in school were tightly focussed on the importance of doing one's duty. Of course, "doing one's duty" governed the mundane details of daily life, but children were also warned that every one of them could be called upon, and should be ready, to do their duty in far more challenging circumstances. It was not only the great Admiral Nelson who should be prepared to die, murmuring, "Thank God I have done my duty!"[5]

The literature of imperialism instructed boys that they were the soldiers, sailors, explorers, and traders of the future "whose duty it will be to hold the Empire" their fathers bequeathed them.[6] Stories of expansionist glory

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permeated school materials such as Nelson's *Royal Readers* and were the stock-in-trade of boys' magazines such as *Chums*. Writing on illustrations in *Chums*, MacDonald observes that through them, "glory, strength and violence are made dramatic and meaningful, yet rendered innocent by boyish high spirits."[7] In *Chums* fighting was "reduced to a code in which reflection was absent, bravery was instinctive, suffering rendered as endurance and death as dignified sacrifice."[8] The enormous popularity of G. A. Henty and G. Manville Fenn testify to the widespread acceptability of the cult of the heroic figure, which, in boys' materials, took an almost exclusively militaristic form.

Henty's titles form a record of imperial achievement. Those such as *Under drake's Flag* or *With Clive in India* set out the myths of how the Empire was won; *In the Heart of the Rockies* or *A Final Reckoning: a Tale of Bushlife in Australia*, how it was held. His here, whose name changed from book to book, but whose physique and manner altered not one whit from Crecy to battles with Aborigines, personified the ideal British virility. In *St. George for England*, Henty explained that courage was "the parent of almost all" the other virtues because it was required to practice most of them.[9] These words prefaced a book in which the success of British manhood was measured in the tallies of the dead and injured inflicted upon the enemy. The significance of one victory was highlighted by the observation that "history has no [other] record of so vast a slaughter by so small a body of men."[10] The "body count" approach to determining success was carried through his books, hammering home the message that one British male was worth multiples of any group of foreigners and that his creed was that which Macauley put into the mouth of Horatius

> And how can man die better
> Than facing fearful odds,
> For the ashes of his fathers,
> And the temples of his gods![11]

Where stores did not deal with war, they often incited boys to demonstrate physical courage. A frequent incident in school stories was one in which the hero found himself obliged to fight another, larger opponent, either on a matter of honor or to protect another, smaller boy. These fights were not brief or minor. To take one example, the fight lasted "for nearly an hour, by the end of which time both had been seriously mauled, but the pluck of neither was abated."[12]

It may be that there were contemporary critics of those writers who urged boys to harbor such aggressive attitudes. Indeed, evangelical magazines did not promote militarism, though MacDonald points out that they were "careful to support England's place in the world."[13] Certainly authorities such as Charlotte Yonge, E. G. Salmon and J. Greenwod wrote articles on the importance of selecting carefully the reading given to the young and ensuring it was of desirable quality. in 1874 in an article entitled "Penny Packets of Poison," Greenwood warned concerned adults

> there is a plague that is striking it up as roots deeper and deeper into English soil...yielding great crops of fruit that quickly fall, rotten-ripe...tempting the ignorant and unwary, and breeding death and misery unspeakable.[14]

But the subject of his condemnation was not the literature of imperialism and its focus on violence, but the penny dreadfuls. These were similarly attacked by another article because they fostered unrealistic and socially disruptive daydreams in the lower orders, encouraging shop girls to think they might marry peers of the realm or actresses they might snare baronets with their beauty and virtue.[15]

While girls might not be expected to go into battle for their country, they did not escape the call to face danger or to be ready to sacrifice themselves. In her *Book of Golden Deeds*, Charlotte Yonge commented that "we all of us enjoy a story of battle and adventure." She went on to argue that the real appeal in scenes of "woe and violence" was the courage and self-sacrifice they revealed, the acts that demonstrated forgetfulness of self."[16] In her book she then recounted tales of remarkable--and often fatal heroism, as many of which figured women and children as men. Thus for Yonge including extreme violence in children's books was justified if its portrayal also revealed heroic deeds done by individuals on behalf of others. Other materials carried the same messages to girls. In the *Royal Readers* there were numerous stories of mothers risking or giving up their lives for their children, while Grace Darling, and her Australian counterpart, Grace Bussell, were featured in many girls' magazines. Even in the penny dreadfuls,

examples of female heroism could be found. Jack Harkaway's wife demonstrated this.

> Throwing herself upon Jack, and standing between his breast and the pistol of Miles Fenton, she looked like a heroine of old. "Back!" she exclaimed, in a clear, but tremulous voice. "Back! You reach his body but through my heart. If I cannot save my husband, I can, at least die for him."[17]

Being ready to do battle with fate remained the staple of much juvenile literature up to World Way II and beyond. We only have to think of the immense popularity of Biggles to be aware of that. The 1964 *UNESCO Statistical Handbook* put Biggles twenty ninth in the ranking of the world's most translated books, showing that his readership extended well beyond English-speaking children. Biggles' creator, CApt. W. E. Johns, published one hundred four books in which Biggles wa the hero. and eleven which starred Worrals, his female counterpart.18 Nor has interest in this kind of action adventure tale expired. Six Biggles books were reissued after editing in 1992 and, depending on their success, more may appear. It could be argued that Douglas Hill's *Galactic Hero* series continues the tradition in an off-planet and future dimension. Thus we should preface our deliberations about violence in contemporary juvenile literature by recognizing that it is only in recent decades that the place of violence in children's books has been so vigorously questioned. Equally though, our acceptance of that fact does not compel us to endorse the perpetuation of past traditions. in the late twentieth century, we need no justification for re-examining our position in regard to this matter. There is no time like the present to seek to exclude violence from children's literature or to permit its inclusion only in ways of which we approve. These are our choices. a historical review simply gives us the reasons of other generations for their actions.

What positions are held today?

In *Old LIes Revisited: Young Readers and the Literature of War and Violence*, Whitehead urges all involved in children's literature to promote juvenile reading which will break the cycle of violence. She herself takes a very conservative view of what is acceptable for young people, endorsing Sutcliff, but condemning Cormier unreservedly and disapproving of Westall's *The Machine Gunners*. She requires of authors writing for juveniles that they make "certain definitive judgements" about "the ultimate consequences of war...and its role in history."[19] She declares "it is the privilege of writers of fiction to create characters who stand out for the prevailing mental set and use them as a way of asking questions and provoking serious though about the burning issues of all times."[20] In short, Whitehead believes that authors for children should be obliged to construct stories that didactically enact the principles of non-violence.[21]

Yet even as committed to non-violence as Whitehead is, she accepts that it should appear in books for adolescents. She recognizes that "there is a need for books which help young people face reality, however distasteful that reality may be.[22]

The South Australian Branch of the Psychologists for the Prevention of War declare their position in regard to violence in the name of their organization. They take a stand close to that of Whitehead, seeing conflict and violence as inherently part of our society so that its portrayal in children's books is inevitable. But they attempt to induce change through promoting books which present constructive alternatives to violence and hostility."[23] This they do by offering a biennial Children's Peace Literature Award. Two of the titles which have so far won the award concern personal relationships in settings of ordinary school and family life; the third is a fable about the destructiveness of violence.

Thus there are those today who take the position that children's books may encompass violence and conflict, but it is essential that they do so in ways that show the suffering caused. It is also important that solutions other than retaliatory violence are given. Some may even agree with Webb who argues for the literary value of the disturbing. "The necessary monster," she writes, "is at the heart of heroic literature, providing it with an imaginative definition by antithesis: whatever the boundaries of the 'normal' may be, the monster exists in violation of them."[24] This may be extrapolated to children's literature. As the monstrousness of the monster is a measure of the hero's daring, so the challenge faced by children in learning constructive responses to aggression will determine their achievement of maturity. Yet as Whitehead points out, once one has accepted that there is a place for violence in children's literature, it is often

difficult to judge in given instances which books are acceptable.[25]

The work of Robert Cormier illustrates the dilemma that is posed by a writer who purposely studies varieties of cruelty. His graphic descriptions of physical brutality are skillfully matched by his portrayal of the mental torture of rejection, isolation and mental intimidation. The power of his writing is never denied. The problem that springs from it is that his very skill may seem to glamorize what he purports to condemn. Whitehead certainly believes this of Cormier. She writes scathingly of his giving his audience what it wants.[26]

Perhaps, though, Cormier's real "failure" is that he refuses to write books that follow the established tradition of Western juvenile fiction which presents a world in which the exercise of courage and adherence to principle guarantees success. In the 1990s there are still those who believe that an essential criterion of children's literature should be that good can be seen to win over evil--in a physical and material sense. For it can be argued that in Cormier's books, good does triumph in an ethical and spiritual sense. In his books, those who remain true to themselves and stick by their principles remain admirable, even if defeated, even if dead. Their position remains as correct as it ever was. For Cormier reverts to the problem of good and evil in its most austere form. Like Socrates, he agues that good must be its own reward. He poses the question--isn't doing the right thing the only choice we have whatever the cost? If, for example, you were at Trinity College with Jerry Renault, and you chose to stand by him, then, indeed, you might have suffered his fate. But if you didn't, if you were "only an onlooker," then in effect you had chosen to let Archie have his own way and to be, therefore, a lesser Archie. Cormier is relentless in making it clear that there can be no fence-sitting on moral issues--either one acts or one does not. Either way, there is no escaping the responsibility for the choice you made.

Perhaps what makes the issue of violence in children's literature more contentious today than it appears to have been in the past is the social context in which we find ourselves. For Henty's imperial heroes, there was the consolation that if they should die, their fame and honor at home was assured. Though not often cited, there was also until recently, a general context of Christian belief in reward in a world beyond the grave for a sacrifice made in this.

Today, Cormier's reduction of the choice between good and evil to its bleakest form--good before evil whatever the cost--must be paid in a social environment stripped for the most part of the comfort of religious conviction or social approval. While in our world of economic rationalism, some figures have achieved prominence for their humanitarianism, there is little evidence today of general community esteem for people of principle over those who can be seen to have been self-serving. The degree to which Jerry Renault is seen to be foolish rather than heroic reflects this. It is this, too, that makes our dilemma in regard to violence in children's literature particularly important for we must find books that pose the issues for children in terms meaningful to them in their world, rather than to us in ours.

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[3]*The Children's Friend*, 1869, pp. 62-63.

[4]*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Trans. R. Jarrell. Illus. Nancy E. Burkert. Kestral Gooks. Harmondworth, Middlesex, Penguin, 1972. This version of the tale by the Brothers Grimm shows the traditional punishment as a background motif to the celebration of Snow White's wedding.

[5]*Beeton's Every Boy's Annual*. 1865. p. 575.

[6]*Beeton's Annual, A Book for the Young*, 1866. p. 2.

[7]MacDonald, R. H., "Signs from the Imperial Quarter: Illustrations in *Chums*, 1892-1914," *Children's Literature*, 16, p. 33.

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[10]*Ibid*. p. 229.

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[12]*Every Boy's Annual*, 1875. p. 94.

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[14]Greenwood, J. "Penny Packets of Poison," reproduced in P. Haining, *The Penny Dreadful, or Strange, Horrid and Sensational Tales!* London: Victor Gollancz, 1975. p. 359.

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[20]*Ibid*. pp. 23-24.

[21]*Ibid*. For example, see how Whitehead believes L. Hoy should have concluded *The Damned*. p. 157.

[22]*Ibid*. p. 5.

[23]*The Advertiser*, Saturday, October 26, 1991. The Magazine, p. 13.

[24]Webb, J. "The Monster as Hero," *Contrary Modes: Proceedings of the World Science Fiction Conference, Melbourne, Australia, 1985*. Published by Ebony Books, Melbourne, in association with the Dept. of English, University of Newcastle, 1985. p. 1.

[25]Whitehead, W. *op. cit*. p. 5.

[26]*Ibid*. p. 5.